

## **Labbadia, Bonnine**

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**From:** Susan Lionberger <s.lionberger@sbcglobal.net>  
**Sent:** Sunday, March 02, 2014 2:20 PM  
**To:** Program Review and Investigation  
**Subject:** Additional Funding for State Park Staff

TO: Connecticut General Assembly  
Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee

DATE: March 2, 2014

I am writing to you regarding the Bill 5370, Section 3, which will be discussed at hearings this week. Since 1988, I have been an active volunteer who has donated countless hours to support Dinosaur State Park. Through the years, I have observed the deterioration of staffing in a major state park that has the unique position of being an educational museum and institution as well as a state park. Dinosaur State Park is open throughout the year, unlike many of the seasonal parks, and is the only park that collects revenue throughout the entire year. Adequate staffing should be a priority, but, sadly, staffing cuts have been the priority and have had a significant impact on the park's operations.

Five years ago, the park had 5 full-time staff members: 2 maintainers, a park manager (Environmental Education Coordinator), a secretary and a naturalist (Environmental Analyst 2). When one of the maintainers retired five years ago, the position was not filled. Four years ago, the naturalist, who had exceptional teaching skills, accepted a position at one of the Community Colleges and was not replaced. Years ago, the park always had two full-time naturalists on staff to produce and administer educational programs.

This past summer, the only maintainer at the park retired. Seasonal employees were used for two months to fill in during the busiest two months of the year. The maintainer's responsibilities include safety at the park, training the seasonal maintenance staff, ordering supplies, properly handling hazardous materials, ensuring that safety procedures are followed and ensuring that park equipment is in good working order. Instead, young, inexperienced personnel were used to keep the park running. Most seasonals are college students who do not have the same level of expertise as the full-time maintainer. During the past summer, there were only two full-time employees who had to juggle their work schedules so that the summer visitors would have someone there to open the doors and make sure that the park was operating safely. Is this any way to run a state park that attracts 60 to 70 thousand visitors a year?

Staffing reductions have forced the park to reduce available days for formal education programs from 3 three days a week to only two. School programs have been impacted. The park has also suspended the very popular workshops for teachers which were organized by the full-time naturalist and park manager. The workshops provided a needed service and encouraged teachers to bring their students to the park, ultimately producing admission revenue.

Volunteers are a good thing, but volunteers are not a replacement for needed staff. Volunteers have been assigned tasks that were normally done by employees such as staffing the admissions desk. Annually, volunteers have provided more than 2,300 hours of time at Dinosaur State Park. They have helped maintain our gardens and trails, staffed the casting, mining and crafts areas, and raised funds for programming and special projects. In addition, for the past eight years, the park has relied upon summer interns to help organize special events and catalogue museum collections. Volunteers, interns and seasonal workers are not the answer to our problem.

When the full-time secretary at Dinosaur State Park retires in the next six to eight months, will the state leave that position vacant too? If so, the park will have to serve thousands of visitors with only two full-time employees and a small budget to hire seasonals.

The future of the park is in jeopardy. Who will be experienced enough to run the park when the the current full-time Maintainer and Park Manager retire? Both will be eligible for retirement in less than 5 years. Dinosaur State Park is also a significant museum of natural history. Staff members need time to understand all aspects of the park and its operations. Younger permanent staff should be at the park now learning how to take over once the current staff retires and be able to step in should illness or a personal emergency affect the permanent staff. For example, the park manager who handles all administrative duties also serves as the

volunteer coordinator and primary educator. Responsibilities also include training all new staff and handling publicity, planning and designing programs, and coordinating special events. One does not acquire these skills overnight.

Not only is it stressful for a small staff to be responsible for just about everything, limited staffing has the potential to compromise the safety of both park staff and the public.

Dinosaur State Park has been a gem among all the state parks. It is easily accessible by highway, has unique exhibits, and offers countless educational opportunities. It needs an adequate well-trained, dedicated staff that will provide our visitors with a quality experience in a safe environment.

Funding that will increase the staff at all state parks is vital. The legislature must act now. The result will be a win-win situation: create additional jobs and improve the educational opportunities for our residents.

Thank you.

Susan Lionberger  
Vice President, Friends of Dinosaur Park and Arboretum, Inc.